DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 092 CS 009 092

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TITLE Big Bucks or Big Problems: The Implications of the Franchise Learning Centers for Reading Professionals.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Viewpoints (120)
JOURNAL CIT Georgia Journal of Reading; v12 n2 p2-6 Spr 1987

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; Institutional Evaluation; Quality Control; Reading Achievement; *Reading Centers; *Reading Teachers
IDENTIFIERS *Educational Issues; Educational Marketing; *Franchising; International Reading Association; Professional Ethics; Reader Advisors

ABSTRACT

Because the mass marketing of educational support services through franchised reading clinics is growing on a daily basis, both reading specialists and reading supervisors need to become aware of the growth of this industry and of its implications for the educational system. Primary forces in the franchising movement, Sylvan Learning Corporation, the American Learning Corporation, and the Huntington Learning Centers have grown by offering a safe, guaranteed product. For example, Sylvan Learning Corporation claims that children will gain a full year in achievement levels after a 36-hour, small group tutorial experience. The success of these three companies is caused by combining successful business practices with a marketplace demand for educational services, but their success, coupled with a lack of state regulation, provides a potential for unethical dealings in both business and education. Reading specialists have a direct role in checking the growth of hucksters in the reading clinic field. Parents should be referred to clinics that are staffed by individuals who meet the qualifications specified in "Guidelines for the Specialized Preparation of Reading Professionals." Only clinics operating under the profession's ethical standards described by the International Reading Association or the College Reading Association should be recommended. In addition, effective monitoring of reading franchises can be undertaken at the state level. (Two footnotes provide information on the availability of the reading professionals and clinic standards guidelines. (MM)

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ED293092

Big Bucks or Big Problems: The Implications of the Franchise Learning Centers for Reading Professionals

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This editorial appeared in Volume 12, No. 2 (Spring 1987) of the Georgia Journal of Reading (pp. 2-6).

CS007552

Big Bucks or Big Problems: The Implications of the Franchise Learning Centers for Reading Professionals

Picture this scene if you will. Mr. and Mrs. Georgia Citizen are sitting comfortably on the sofa, sipping Bud Lite while trying to relax after a hard day's work at the Ford plant. Looking forward to a little entertainment, the couple has switched on the television set to catch the weekly highlights of the recent events in the World Wrestling Federation. Then, between Hulk Hogan's ravings and the usual commercials for tractor-pull contests, albums of Fats Domino's greatest hits, and new improved, updated and fully submersible vegematics, they see a new advertisement. A Bob Barker look-alike starts a fast-paced sales pitch for Dr. Dixie's Reading Clinic and Tutorial Services, Inc. The doting parents learn that the good doctor guarantees to raise their child's level of reading achievement by a full year after only 40 hours of personalized instruction with a time-tested phonics program. Within minutes Mrs. Georgia Citizen phones the representative for the local Dr. Dixie franchise, which is conveniently located behind the town's Dairy Queen. (It doesn't matter where you live, Dr. Dixie franchises are always found behind the Dairy Queen because leftover French fries are part of the behavior modification plan.) Then, within a few days, Jimmy G. Citizen is contentedly stuffing his face with French fries as he works away with "Dr. D's Positively Proven Phonics Program" in a local Dr. Dixie franchise behind a Dairy Queen somewhere in Georgia.

Does this scenario seem farfetched to you? Admittedly, the picture is somewhat exaggerated. Nevertheless, the mass marketing of educational support services is here and growing on a daily basis. Hence, both reading specialists and reading supervisors need to become fully cognizant of the growth of this industry and of its implications for our educational system.

Mind you, we are not talking about your traditional reading/learning clinic that is associated with a teacher education program or an accredited institution (granted, some of these do require our scrutiny). Rather, we address those corporation-sponsored clinics that have placed educational services, like so many fast food restaurants, in the lucrative marketing world. Now, along with the services offered by individual moonlighting teachers and by college clinics staffed by reading specialists in training, we have a growing number of franchise operations where the typical licensee is a business person. And, while finances are involved in all three situations, the profit motive is the primary drive and a positive cash flow is the bottom line for the franchise clinic. Hence, the market for services offered by proprietary learning centers consists primarily of parents with disposable income (perchance, your basic yuppies) who wish to help Jimmy bring up low grades/achievement test scores or move ahead/keep ahead of his peers.

Introducing the Big Three

Three large companies, two of which were recently acquired by still larger corporations, are the primary forces in the franchising movement. The "General Motors" of the field, Sylvan Learning Corporation, was recently bought by the Kinder Care Learning Centers group for a reported

5.2 million dollars. Currently the company operates well over 250 franchises across the nation, and the number of its franchises grows on a regular basis. The second member of the "Big Three," the American Learning Corporation - The Reading Game, grew out of the Southern California market. Now that this firm has been bought by Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., its field of operations is expanding in an eastward progression. The third force within the franchising movement is comprised of clinics which are operated primarily in the Northeast by the Huntington Learning Centers organization. This company, like the others, is expansion oriented.

Franchising fees vary among the three companies and, in each case, may appear rather steep to an individual making an educator's salary. However, the potential return on the investment is great. As an example, if a franchise within the Sylvan Learning Corporation operates at full capacity (120 students), there will be a 100% return on the initial investment of $75,000 to $100,000 within the first year of business. Obviously, this is a very attractive proposition. Yet, like any business driven by the profit motive, franchisees must sell work product. In this field, the product is blocks of instructional time. Sylvan provides 36 hours of instruction for $900, Reading Game offers 48 hours for $1,000, and Huntington offers 120 hours at $2,600. For the fee, children receive small group instruction from a certified teacher who receives an hourly wage which ranges from $6.00 to $10.00 per hour. The bottom line is to sell work product to keep the doors open, and as a general rule, the companies have been successful in meeting that goal.

Promises and Problems

Indeed, these programs are not overnight successes, but like McDonald's restaurants, the Big Three have grown during the past 18 years by offering a safe, guaranteed product. For instance, Sylvan Learning Corporation boasts that children will gain a full year in achievement levels after a 36-hour, small group tutorial experience in an ideal teaching environment. The product is safe and can be guaranteed because of the nature of the tutorial learning experience. In recent years, numerous reports have noted the positive results achieved even by tutoring programs that use marginally trained school volunteers, college students, and paraprofessionals tutoring in coatrooms, cafeterias, or any other available cubbyhole. Hence, the results achieved by the franchise center are not that impressive. The major difference between the services is economic rather than educational. Those children who receive services in for-profit centers are usually from economically secure backgrounds, while those who receive free services (when available) are from an economic underclass.

The success of the Big Three may appear a marriage of successful business practices with a marketplace demand for educational services. Yet the very success of these firms and the laissez faire attitude of state educational agencies (This writer was not able to learn of any national accreditation or credentialing process) have led other companies to enter the marketplace. Whenever competition is keen, profit potentials are high, and concerns are unregulated or underregulated, there is a potential for unethical dealings in business and, in this case, education.

Let us share with you several examples of questionable practices. First, during the past year, a new franchise center opened for business in a midwestern college town. Appropriate advertisements, containing the usual guarantees for educational growth, were placed in the local paper. As the new school year began, many local youngsters were enrolled in the program. Ironically, the local school of education also matriculated a new student in the reading specialist program--the supervisor/owner of the new learning center.

Other examples of questionable practices focus on the actual franchising of clinics. In one case, an outfit (not one of the Big Three) has directed its advertisements at potential investors from our profession. Here there is little pretense as to whether educational services or potential profits are of primary import. The headline reads, "Big Profits from a Small Investment--Own Your Own Business," and is followed by copy extolling "a unique learning center facility where children become independent learners and owners become financially secure." The profit motive is accentuated by a sketch of a $10 bill which grows to a $100 bill under a superimposed magnifying glass. In addition, the layout clearly notes that one need not be a reading specialist to be a franchisee!

At the other end of the country, a similar outfit seeks potential franchisees by highlighting time-proven marketing procedures and size of territory. In a sense, we see new meaning for the term, "The buck stops here." These situations, though extreme, should lead educators to call for direct action by professional organizations and state and local school agencies.

Recommendations for Action

Hence, if you accept my premise that a problem currently exists, or if you merely agree that the unchecked growth of the franchise movement poses a potential problem, you and I, as concerned educators, must act now. The rights of legitimate clinical operations must be guaranteed; yet, on the other hand, parents and children must be protected from hucksterism, with its inevitable bad publicity for the field of reading. Here, then, are several suggestions that might serve as a catalyst for action.

First, we as reading specialists have a direct role to play. Granted, all of us give 100% to our jobs and the children. Nevertheless, there will always be youngsters who can benefit from additional help outside the school setting. In addition, there will always be parents who want to help their child achieve on a level above his/her peers. In either case, franchise clinics may appear to be viable alternatives, and educators will be asked to make recommendations and referrals. When making referrals, educators should keep the following points in mind:

1. Refer parents to clinics that are staffed by individuals who meet the qualifications for designated roles and responsibilities of reading professionals as specified in Guidelines for the Specialized Preparation of Reading Professionals (see footnote 1). For example, staff members conducting basic educational services should meet the requirements for either of the classroom teacher categories, and staff members providing remedial services would meet the requirements for a diagnostic-remedial specialist.

2. Refer parents to clinics where supervision of staff members is provided by individuals who meet the qualifications for designated roles and responsibilities of a reading coordinator/supervisor as delineated in Guidelines for the Specialized Preparation of Reading Professionals. When appropriate, supervisors should also meet the basic qualifications of a reading consultant/reading resource teacher or a reading professor.

3. Refer parents to clinics that meet the basic standards for clinics as described in Standards and Indicators of Quality for Clinic Preparation in Reading and the Operation of Reading Clinics and Clinics with Reading Components (see footnote 2).

4. Refer parents to clinics that operate under the basic ethical standards of the profession as ascribed to by organizations such as the International Reading Association, the College Reading Association, etc.

5. Refer parents to clinics that follow the basic guidelines for testing and assessment issued by the American Psychological Association.

In some cases, the effective monitoring of reading franchises can be undertaken only at the state level. Hence, additional recommendations can be directed toward the state educational agency in coordination with the G.C.I.R.A.:

1. The state educational agency should develop and implement an accreditation and licensing process for all private reading clinics operating in Georgia. Before granting a license, the business must demonstrate that all the basic standards noted in the aforementioned I.R.A. and C.R.A. documents will be adhered to in hiring personnel and running the clinic on a daily basis.

2. The state educational agency should require that all licensed clinics undergo evaluation by teams of professionals (i.e., local reading specialists, reading professors, and clinic operators) on a regular basis. Hence, appropriate evaluation/reaccreditation procedures should be drafted by a committee composed of representatives from the G.C.I.R.A., the state educational agency, selected teacher training institutions, and private clinic services.

3. The credentials of all personnel serving in for-profit clinics should be registered with the state educational agency at the time of initial service and then reregistered every three years. A credential should not be reregistered if the respective individual has not undertaken a specified inservice program through an educational authority or an institution of higher education.

All clinics, both nonprofit and profit oriented, along with all individuals serving in such centers, have important responsibilities to fulfill. First and foremost, all individuals serving in these centers must willingly adhere to the standards of ethical practice, pedagogical performance, and basic training as detailed in the I.R.A. Guidelines and the C.R.A. Guidelines. Second, employers and employees of centers alike should participate actively in the appropriate special interest groups of the I.R.A. or in the Clinical Division of the C.R.A. Third, centers must work directly with the local school district staff to promote each tutee's total education. Obviously, such interaction must be of a reciprocal nature. For instance, clinics must provide the tutee's teacher with up-to-date progress reports, while the tutor must be informed of the basic

educational goals and objectives for the tutee and his/her class. Finally, franchise owners must understand that there is a multiplicity of methods for overcoming learning problems. The center must not adopt a single "quick-fix" method which does not get to the root of an educational problem.

A Final Word

The suggestions that have been put forth in this essay are by no means all inclusive. Rather, they serve as a focal point for further discussions about the need for reading professionals to provide leadership to those involved with the growing number of reading/learning center franchises across the nation. A proactive and interactive stance at this time is far more positive than forced reactive actions at a later date.

Footnotes

[1]Copies of this publication are available at a cost of $1.00 per single copy and $5.00 per ten copies. Write to: International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, P.O. Box 8139, Newark, Delaware 19714-8139, Attention: Guidelines. Please enclose full payment with your order.

[2]Copies of this publication are available at a cost of $3.60 per copy. Write to: College Reading Association, c/o Dr. Lonnie McIntyre, College of Education, 358 Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48824-1034, Attention: Clinic Reading Standards. Please enclose full payment with your order.